

A People Vindicated

Isaiah 62:1-5 (Jerusalem Bible)

About Zion I will not be silent,
about Jerusalem I will not grow weary,
until her integrity shines out like the dawn
and her salvation flames like a torch.

The nations then will see your integrity,
all the kings your glory,
and you will be called by a new name,
one which the mouth of Yahweh will confer.

You are to be a crown of splendor in the hand of Yahweh,
a princely diadem in the hand of your God;

no longer are you to be named "Forsaken,"
nor your land "Abandoned,"

but you shall be called "My Delight,"
and your land "The Wedded";

for Yahweh takes delight in you
and your land will have its wedding.

Like a young man marrying a virgin,
so will the one who built you wed you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride,
so will your God rejoice in you.

I appreciate Bill's choice to read from the Jerusalem Bible this morning. We usually use the NRSV. It's a good translation, and is what's in our pews here in the sanctuary. But the Jerusalem Bible is my go-to text when I first begin an in-depth study of a particular passage of Scripture, so, I commend Bill's use of it today.

I probably come across as critical, maybe even judgmental about the largest and fastest growing spiritual population in North America—what Thomas Bandy calls the "Spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public." Those who call themselves, "Spiritual but not religious."

Maybe I am too harsh. Like the boy who cried, "The king has on no clothes!", there is a degree of honesty in their abandonment of what they see as a misdirected community that more closely models human empire than divine kingdom—a community whose "prosperity gospel" clashes with Jesus' sermon on the mount.

My greatest criticism is that they've given up. The community God called into partnership is not perfect; it never has been. But within that community fathered by Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth there still are pockets of integrity—voices of truth that validate our faithfulness. To give up on "organized

religion" is to throw out the baby with the bath—to privatize "spirituality"—to abandon ship because of the storm, to float isolated, adrift unanchored in the waves—rather than to trust the captain who has navigated storm after storm for 4,000 years, and the ship still floats!

Through those 4,000 years, God never gave up on the community. Whether Israel or the Church, when God calls the community back there always are those who give up; but there also is a remnant who respond and return.

Today's text addresses such a situation. Some background:

God called Abraham to father a nation—and this is key to the whole thing—a nation through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed. It was a totally new thing: a God who seeks to bless. After a few generations Abraham's family had become a tribe, and after several more generations had become a nation of twelve tribes enduring harsh bondage in Egypt.

But God was doing another new thing. In that culture, gods were tribal and territorial. But this God—the God who called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—went down with the people and was with them in the mud pits of Egypt.

And then, God did still another new thing. God led the people out of Egyptian bondage to a promised land and established them as the greatest of nations—called to be a blessing to all nations of the earth.

But the people had other ideas. You see, all this was new. There was no precedent—no paradigm for being a nation of blessing. So, the people settled for the model of the cultures around them. They had burnt offerings, and temples and liturgies initiated to entice God's blessings for themselves.

God sent prophets to guide them—to call them to justice and compassion for the poor; but the people were satisfied with status quo. After all, look at us: we're healthy, wealthy, and wise, our nation is strong... If we help the poor, we'll just be enabling their laziness and irresponsibility. This new religious thing is working; so why should we change?

In general, the community called by God to be a blessing to all nations still lives by that model, squeezing the life and teachings of Jesus into that model, and living, not to be a blessing, but to be blessed—not to stand in solidarity with the dispossessed, but stand with the winners—the wealthy and the powerful. The irony is that the greatest blessing accrues to those who are the greatest blessing.

Many years ago I decided I wanted to restore an old car—something to do to bond with my sons. I found an old Chevy Corvair, sitting under a tree on a farm outside Tulsa. I liked it, and made an offer, but it wouldn't start. Sitting under that tree for years, not doing what a car is created to do, not being what a car is created to be, dirt doblers had built nests in the carburetors.

For generations, the people God called would not be who they were called to be—would not do what they were called to do, and there came a time when they no longer could function as a viable nation. In 586 BC Babylonian forces under the command of Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's beautiful temple. The leaders, scholars, artisans, skilled craftsmen, and the young were hauled away in chains to Babylon.

Seventy years later, the Persian Empire, led by Cyrus the Great, overran Babylon, and freed the Israelites to return to their homeland. In today's text from Isaiah, some Israelites have returned from Babylon and are reweaving the fabric of community life in that desolate landscape that once had radiated the glory of David and Solomon. Jerusalem was a pile of charred rubble, but in today's text the poet shares a vision with childlike joy:

The nations then will see your integrity, (vindication)

all the kings your glory,

and you will be called by a new name,

one which the mouth of Yahweh will confer.

You are to be a crown of splendor in the hand of Yahweh,

a princely diadem in the hand of your God;

no longer are you to be named "Forsaken,"

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but you shall be called "My Delight,"

and your land "The Wedded";

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Like a young man marrying a virgin,

so will the one who built you wed you,

and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride,

so will your God rejoice in you.

Two things are basic for the understanding of this passage—things consistent with the basic trajectory of all Judeo-Christian Scripture from *Genesis* 1 thru *Revelation* 22.

- I. Beginning with Abraham, it always is *into community* that God calls a people.
 - a. In community the private lives of people are embraced in *security and safety*.
 - b. To the extent that God interacts with individuals—Abraham, Moses, the Prophets—it is for the benefit of the community: an instruction, an exhortation, a word of encouragement, a warning, forgiveness...

- c. ...and individuals draw identity and discover life's *meaning* from community. Since before *homo sapiens* raised up from their knuckles and walked upright on two feet, all God's creatures were created as social beings: herds and flocks; pods of whales; prides of lions; and a community of baboons is called... wait for it... a "congress." (That's a very informal title. The formal title is a "troop" of baboons; but... I'll just leave that there.)

The point is that all God's creatures are social beings—seeking a community of affirmation that molds their behavior, drawing their character and roles from the feedback of others within that community—sometimes for good; sometimes not so good.

Sociologist George Herbert Mead said that even a person isolated on some island with no community at all would assume a community—would mold his behavior according to how he assumes a community would respond. Mead called that assumed community the "Generalized Other." We are social creatures. It's in our DNA.

In I Corinthians, Paul writes that at the Lord's Table, the failure to discern and honor the community of faith leads to needless hardship and suffering.

The abandonment of community and the veneration of individualism and the privatizing of life over the past three or four generations has produced a culture of isolation, depression, and anxiety.

II. And note: It always is God who initiates any manifestation of a divine/human relationship.

- a. It is God who *creates* community—calls it into existence. Thru Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and the prophets, and finally at Pentecost, God calls a people into a covenantal of love and grace;
- b. ...and it is God who *redeems* community—leaves the door open and the light on when the community strays. Remember the parable of the prodigal son? A son lives a life of irresponsible self-indulgence; but the father doesn't just stand waiting, he runs to meet him when he returns;
- c. ...and it is God who *sustains* community—names it and gives it character and value.

The second thing basic to the understanding of today's Scripture is that when the people respond faithfully to the grace into which the call invites them, "The nations will see your vindication." (JB: "Integrity")

- a. That was the core of God's call from the beginning: to Abraham the call was to go to a place where God would show him, and God would make of him a great nation, and all the nations of the world would be blessed through

Abraham's faithfulness.

- b. The disciples of Isaiah, speaking for God to the Israelites in Babylon: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; *I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"
- c. This is the source of our congregation's Missional Purpose: to be a beacon of inclusive welcome and compassionate caring, reaching out proactively through the gifts and resources of our people to administer wholeness in a fragmented world.

It can be demonstrated that the community fathered by Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth once again is in bondage. Source after source shows how the community of faith has at various levels and in various settings since the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the adaptation of St. Augustine, adopted the values of the world in place of the call of God to be the community through which all nations of the world will be blessed. From Christian Nationalism to a prosperity gospel to a blame-the-victim reversal of Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, most expressions of the community God called into being to bless all nations of the earth are in bondage to a model of human empire, rather than a model of divine kingdom—to a model of victory rather than of obedience.

But here is the good news from the poet in today's Scripture—good news to those who have given up on the church: when God's people are Faithful to God's call—God's invitation to return from bondage into grace—that faithfulness always generates boundless joy! And here's the zinger: that joy not only is celebrated by the faithful community, it also is God who rejoices as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.